

Chapter 9 - Punctuated Equilibrium¹

According to punctuated equilibrium theory, political systems can be characterised as both stable *and* dynamic. Most policies stay the same for long periods while some change very quickly and dramatically. Or, policy change in a particular area may be incremental for decades, only to be followed by profound change which sets an entirely new direction for policy in the future. The aim of punctuated equilibrium theory is to explain these long periods of policy stability punctuated by short but intense periods of change. As chapter 5 suggests, we can begin to explain it with reference to the limits of comprehensive rationality: since decision-makers cannot consider all issues at all times, they ignore most and promote relatively few to the top of their agenda. This lack of attention to most issues helps explain why most policies may not change, while intense periods of attention to some issues may prompt new ways to **frame** and solve old policy problems. Further explanation comes from the power of participants, either to minimise attention and maintain an established frame of reference, or to expand attention to new audiences in the hope of generating the type of conflict and debate necessary to effect major policy change (True, Jones and Baumgartner, 2007: 157).

Agenda setting – the study of public, media and government attention to policy issues.

Frame – to define a policy's image (how an issue is portrayed and categorised).

Policy communities – close relationships between interest groups and public officials, based on the exchange of information for influence (but see box 9.1 on the European/ US usage). The links endure if participants establish a **policy monopoly**, or a dominant image of the policy problem.

Punctuated equilibrium can be described very simply as the novel combination of two approaches to the study of public policy: **policy communities** and **agenda setting**. In the former, the main focus is identifying stable relationships between interest groups and public officials. These relationships endure because the participants share a broad agreement about the nature of a policy problem and few other actors are interested in the issue (Jordan and Maloney, 1997). In many instances, those most involved are able to protect a **policy monopoly** by framing the issue in a particular way. At first this may involve the argument that the policy problem has largely been solved, with only the implementation to be addressed. Then, the issue may be portrayed as dull, to minimise external interest, or as technical, requiring a certain level of expertise, to exclude other actors. Group-government relations take place beyond the public spotlight since the issues are presented as too dull, technical or routine to invite attention, while most political actors do not have the resources to engage in this type of policy making. As a result, policy making tends to be incremental and based on previous agreements between a small number of participants.

In contrast, the study of agenda setting and public attention rarely identifies incremental change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 10). A key focus is issues which attract high

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levels of attention. This could refer to a rise in attention following a crisis or ‘triggering event’ (Dearing and Rogers, 1996: 37-39). Or, it can be caused by interest groups trying

Venues – institutions such as government departments, congressional committees and the courts, where ‘authoritative decisions are made’.

Venue Shopping – the attempt to seek favourable audiences in other venues.

to draw attention to ‘their’ issues. In particular, Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 32-7) connect shifts of attention to **venue** shift, in which an issue can become the jurisdiction of more than one institution at the same time. Groups excluded from policy monopolies will try to shift the debate from within by, for example, appealing to public officials and questioning the existing approach. If unsuccessful, they have an incentive to **venue-shop**, or seek influential audiences elsewhere. It may involve an appeal to a different level or type of governing institution (such as a legislative committee or court) capable of

making decisions on the same policy issue. Or, groups may seek to expand the size of the interested audience by making direct appeals to the public. When an issue reaches the ‘top’ of this wider political agenda it becomes processed in a different way: more participants become involved and more ways to look at (and solve) the policy problem are considered.

A combination of approaches explains both continuity and change. Policies stay the same within policy communities because there is minimal external interest or a limited ability of outsiders to engage. Policies change when there is sufficient external interest to cause the collapse of previously insulated communities. External attention rises and the issues are considered in a broader political environment where power is more evenly spread and new actors can set the agenda. In both cases the key focus is the competition to define a ‘policy image’, or the way in which a policy is understood and discussed (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 31). While the successful definition of policy as a technical or humdrum issue ensures that issues may be monopolised and considered quietly in one venue, the reframing of that issue as crucial to other institutions, or the big political issues of the day, ensures that it will be considered by many audiences and processed in more than one decision-making venue.

The aim of this chapter is to outline the model of punctuated equilibrium in detail, focusing on:

- The meaning of punctuated equilibrium, policy community and monopoly
- The literature on agenda setting.
- The use of venue shopping to explain issue expansion, shifts of attention and policy change.
- The applicability of punctuated equilibrium within US and other political systems.
- The value of this theory to the wider concerns of this book, such as: how do we identify power within a political system; and, why does policy change?

Why ‘Punctuated Equilibrium’?

The term ‘punctuated equilibrium’ was inspired from its use in the natural sciences to describe dramatic shifts rather than incremental development in evolution (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 19). In public policy, equilibrium (balance, or stability) is the result of: (a) dominance within government based on a supporting policy image and the enforcement of the status quo; and (b) political forces cancelling each other out. Punctuation refers to a policy change associated with: (a) the use of a competing policy image to mobilize previously uninvolved actors; and (b) imbalances between competing political forces. In other words, the often-misleading appearance of equilibrium refers to two things: first, the *creation* of institutions (such as policy communities) to support a policy monopoly; and, second, the *defence* of that monopoly by mobilizing against challenges by excluded groups. Punctuated equilibrium occurs if this strategy is unsuccessful and the policy monopoly is destroyed. It follows the successful promotion of a new policy image. The new approach to defining and solving a policy problem legitimises the involvement of previously excluded groups and encourages previously uninvolved actors (often in different venues) to become involved. The result is constant change (cloaked by an overall picture of stability) as policy monopolies are created while others are destroyed. Note, however, that the term is used widely in political science, and we should not confuse it with the (albeit related) discussions of institutionalism we encounter in chapter 4 (Hay, 2002: 161). We should also not necessarily equate punctuations with single events. Rather, events can prompt a long term ‘explosive process’ and we may not return to ‘equilibrium for a very long time’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 280-1).

Box 9.1 The Changing World of Group-Government Relations

The study of group-government relations has produced numerous approaches and a proliferation of terms to describe the nature and frequency of contact. They include: competitive pluralism, state corporatism, subgovernment, iron triangles, policy whirlpools, subsystems, policy communities and issue networks (Jordan, 1981; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 7; Jordan and Schubert, 1992). While issue networks are loose relationships between public officials and many interest groups, policy communities or iron triangles are close relationships between certain interest groups and public officials (*but note that, in the US, ‘policy community’ may be understood very differently – as something more like an open advocacy coalition in chapter 10*). ‘Policy network’ became the generic umbrella term for group-government relationships in the UK, EU, Australia and Canada, while ‘subsystem’ is used more in the US. In Europe, early studies were linked to a focus on the putative differences between pluralism (bargaining with government and competition between large numbers of participants) and corporatism (formal collaboration between the state and a very restricted number of large groups representing, for example, business and labour). In the US, early studies identified relatively insulated and uncompetitive group-government relationships within a political system assumed to be pluralistic (iron triangles are closed relationships between implementing agencies, legislators, and favoured interest groups). Now, there is a greater focus on the need to explain instability and policy change. In the US, it may be a response to the identification, since the 1970s, of a more complex political system - containing a much larger number of groups, experts and other policy participants – which makes it much more difficult for policy issues to be insulated from attention and for

groups to restrict debate. In the UK, it may follow the experience of the Thatcher government and the imposition of policy change in the face of widespread opposition, rather than through negotiation and compromise within closed communities. In the EU, it may follow the identification of a policy process which is ‘more fluid and unpredictable – and less controllable – than seems to be implied by enthusiasts of the network approach’ (Richardson, 2000: 1008). In each case, the group-government world appears to be changing and our aim is to explain this change.

Policy Communities and Policy Monopolies

Marsh and Rhodes (1992a) identify a continuum of group-government relationships based on factors such as the number of participants and frequency and nature of contact. As table 9.1 suggests, the concept of policy community sits at one end of the continuum, while the issue network represents its polar opposite. The term ‘policy community’ suggests a close, stable and often consensual relationship between a small number of groups and government (but see box 9.1 on the Europe/ US usage). In contrast, ‘issue network’ (discussed below) suggests a wide variety of links between the government and many groups, in which there is less agreement and less stability.

Important note: Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 7) use **policy monopoly** twice, to refer to the institutional arrangements (**policy community**) and the policy image: ‘Policy monopolies have two important characteristics. First, a definable institutional structure is responsible for policy making, and that structure limits its access to the policy process. Second, a powerful supporting idea is associated with the institution’.

This spectrum of group-government relations sums up the focus of punctuated equilibrium in a nutshell. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) seek to explain the success or failure of attempts by certain groups to establish a policy monopoly. Policy monopoly refers to the ‘monopoly on political understandings’, or the ability of certain groups to maintain a dominant image of the policy problem (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 6). The maintenance of this monopoly requires a common adherence to the same policy image and an ability to exclude groups who do not sign up to this agenda. For our purposes, **policy community** is the venue or ‘institutional arrangement that

reinforces that understanding’ (1993: 6; Jordan, 2005: 320). When civil servants and certain interest groups form relationships, they recognise the benefits - such as policy stability - of attempting to insulate their decisions from the wider political process (Richardson and Jordan, 1979). In some accounts, this stability hinges on socialisation. Inclusion within the policy community depends on the gaining of personal trust, through the awareness of, following, and reproduction of ‘rules of the game’. The learning process involves immersion within a ‘common culture’ in which there exists a great deal of agreement on the nature and solutions to policy problems (Wilks and Wright, 1987: 302-3; McPherson and Raab, 1988: 55).

Table 9.1 Types of Policy Network

	Policy Community	Issue Networks
<i>Numbers of pressure participants</i>	Small - many are excluded.	Large – the barriers to entry are low.

<i>Nature of consultation</i>	Frequent, high quality.	Variable frequency and quality.
<i>Nature of interaction</i>	Stable and close.	Less stable. Access fluctuates significantly.
<i>Levels of consensus</i>	Participants share the same basic understanding of the policy problem and how to solve it. Members accept and support the outcomes.	A measure of agreement may be reached but conflict and opposition is more likely.

Source: Adapted from Marsh and Rhodes (1992: 251). See also Jordan (1981: 98)

It explains the ‘insulation’ of these communities from the wider political process. First, policies are broken down to such a level that few actors are interested or have the time or resources to become involved (particularly when the policy problem appears to have been solved). Second, a ‘rule of the game’ is that participants resolve issues within the network, rather than seeking change elsewhere. Participants know that while they may not agree with all decisions taken, it is counterproductive to highlight these grievances in other arenas where more involvement may dilute their influence. Third, the lack of wider political interest is furthered by defining issues as humdrum or technical, limiting attention and the ability of other groups to participate. If *successful*, they maintain a policy community which is characterised by:

- *A limited group membership*, based on the use of a certain policy image to exclude most participants and reduce the visibility of decisions.
- *Good quality relations* between groups and government, based on shared values or a shared understanding of the policy problem.
- *Policy and policy community stability*, based on a lack of external attention and the fruitful exchange of resources between groups and public officials (Jordan and Maloney, 1997).

If the attempt to maintain a policy monopoly is *unsuccessful*, it suggests that the participants *cannot* insulate the decision-making process from a wider audience and there is effective competition to define the policy’s image (effectively as a problem that has *not* been solved). More groups become involved, there is greater competition for access to government, and there is greater political instability caused by group conflict. In other words, the breakdown of a policy monopoly is linked strongly to a movement away from policy communities (or, in the US literature, iron triangles) towards issue networks.

‘Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment’

Hugh Heclo’s (1978) study of the US executive challenges the ‘received opinion’ which explains most public policy making with reference to iron triangles linking ‘executive bureaus, congressional committees and interest groups with a stake in particular programs’ and excluding other political actors: ‘the iron triangle concept is not so much wrong as it is disastrously incomplete ... Looking for the closed triangles of control, we tend to miss the fairly open networks of people that increasingly impinge upon

government' (1978: 88). Heclo argues that the huge post-war rise in federal responsibilities (and the federal budget) was not accompanied by a proportionate growth in the executive's administration. Therefore, the administration became increasingly stretched as more groups became mobilized (in response to the growth of government and the consequences of policy). The simple 'clubby days of Washington politics' were replaced by 'complex relationships' among a huge, politically active population (1978: 94; 97; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 177-8; see also Jordan, 1981: 98 for similar trends in the UK). It suggests that if we focus on a small number of powerful actors then we overlook, 'the many whose webs of influence provoke and guide the exercise of power' (1978: 102).

In contrast with iron triangles, issue networks comprise a wide range of participants with 'quite variable degrees of mutual commitment', and participants 'move in and out of the networks constantly' (1978: 102). The boundaries of each network are indistinct and fluid. The barriers to entry are low, and based more on the ability to contribute to a discussion of the issues than material power or a common adherence to a policy image. The network is relatively unstable and resolutions to policy debate are conducted 'rarely in any controlled, well-organized way' (1978: 104). Overall, there is less evidence to suggest that iron triangles maintain policy monopolies. Issues which were once 'quietly managed by a small group of insiders' have now become 'controversial and politicized' as the role of policy activists increase and previously insulated policy communities collide (1978: 105). Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 45) provide a range of examples demonstrating this process. Policy communities 'relating to tobacco, pesticides, air and water pollution, airlines, trucking, telecommunications, and nuclear power were all destroyed or radically altered'.

However, a problem may occur if we exaggerate Heclo's position, focus too much on issue networks and assume that group-government relations are pluralistic. This wider political process may mask 'the real locus of decision' (Richardson, Gustafsson and Jordan, 1982: 2) and it is possible for a policy community to exist *within* an issue network (Read, 1996). Thus, Heclo's (1978: 105; see also True et al, 2007: 158) qualification is crucial: while issue networks 'complicate calculations' and 'decrease predictability', it would be 'foolish' to argue that they replace 'the more familiar politics of subgovernments'. The 'politics of subgovernments' is still compelling. The sheer size of government means that most policy decisions are effectively beyond the reach (or interest) of government ministers or Presidents (Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Heclo, 1978: 88). When decision-makers focus on one issue they have to ignore 99 others. The policy process is broken down into more manageable issues involving a smaller number of interested and knowledgeable participants. Baumgartner and Jones (1993, following Simon, 1976: 242-3) call this **parallel processing**. Most public policy is conducted primarily through small and specialist policy communities which process 'technical' issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public, and with minimal involvement from senior decision makers. These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain groups (Jordan and Maloney, 1997). Senior decision-makers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, those officials rely on specialist organisations. Those organisations

trade that information/ advice (and other resources such as the ability to implement government policy) for influence within government. Further, the logic of this relationship holds regardless of the party of government. Therefore, overall, we are unlikely to witness the types of radical policy shift associated with a change of government or President or a shift of party control in Congress.

Serial processing – when issues are considered one (or a few) at a time.

Parallel processing – When many issues are considered at one time by component parts of a larger organisation.

On the other hand, these relationships often break down and policies *do* change. In such cases, parallel processing at a low level of government is replaced by **serial processing** at the ‘macropolitical’ (highest, or most senior) level (True et al, 2007: 158-9). Therefore, any characterization of group-government relationships is a ‘snapshot of a dynamic process’ in which stable relationships are created and then destroyed (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 6). But what *causes* the movement from enduring and stable communities

to a more fluid and unpredictable issue network process? Punctuated equilibrium theory suggests that policy change follows a mutually-reinforcing process of increased attention, venue shift and shifting policy images (True et al, 2007: 160). This is a key concern of the literature on agenda-setting.

Policy Issue – a focus of discussion, debate or conflict in politics.

Policy problem – a policy issue to be *solved*.

At the top of the policy agenda – treated as the most important (or most immediate) policy problem to be addressed.

Agenda Setting

The agenda setting literature focuses on: (a) levels of public, media and government attention to particular issues; and (b) what causes attention to rise or fall. It relates to three main factors. First, the pre-existing prejudices of the audience: different audiences will be receptive to different **policy issues**. Or, different issues may occupy the **top of the agenda** in different arenas. This effect is more marked if we divide the policy agenda into smaller parts and measure issue attention in local, regional, national and supranational governments, the legislature or the courts. Yet, in many cases a range of audiences may be receptive to similar issues simultaneously if convinced that they are important. The

media represents the ‘privileged means of communication’ between multiple venues which are often ‘tightly linked’, with ‘shifts in attention in one ... quickly followed by shifts in others’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 107; Lynas, 2008).

Second, the significance and immediacy of issues: some **policy problems** are more important than others, while some require quick decisions. For example, economic issues (such as unemployment, interest rates or tax) always remain high on the political agenda, while natural and human disasters focus the attention and demand an immediate response. Yet, since the attention of audiences is limited, and the number of potential issues is almost infinite, the significance of each issue and event is subject to interpretation, debate and competition (see Monbiot, 2008 for an entertaining critique).

These qualifications point to the third main factor: the ability of political actors to draw attention to one issue at the expense of another. For Dearing and Rogers (1996: 1) agenda setting describes, 'an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites'. Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 11-12) focus on the effect this attention has on public policy. It includes what Kingdon (1984: 3-4) calls the *governmental agenda* (the problems that decision-makers 'are paying some serious attention at any given time') and the *decision agenda* (the problems 'that are up for an active decision'). In this context, agenda setting can be summed up with two key statements:

1. There is an almost unlimited amount of policy problems that *could* reach the top of the policy agenda. Yet, very few issues do, while most others do not.
2. There is an almost unlimited number of solutions to those policy problems. Yet, few policy solutions will be considered while most others will not (box 9.2).

Box 9.2 Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building

Cobb and Elder's (1972: 10; 24-5; 28) main thesis is that there are numerous biases within the political system that restrict attention to certain problems and limit the consideration of solutions. First, the distribution of influence within society is unequal and participation within interest groups is limited (Schattschneider, 1960). Second, dominant interests in the political system promote 'non-decision making' or the use of social values and institutions to restrict the scope of debate (chapter 3; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962: 948; Crenson, 1971; Gamble, 2000: 295). Third, the only policies given serious consideration are those which differ incrementally from the status quo, while the reaction to the consequences of previous decisions dominates the political agenda (chapter 5; Lindblom, 1968; Hogwood, 1987: 35). Fourth, the problem may not yet be a legitimate area of concern because the state has never been involved (Cobb and Elder, 1972: 86; 93; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 46). Finally, the problem may seem too expensive or impossible to solve (box 9.3). In this light, their question is: *how can this bias towards the status quo be overcome?*

Cobb and Elder (1972: 105-10) argue that the best chance for an issue to reach the top of the agenda is to maximise the size of its audience. They present the image of four different audiences as circles within larger circles. The smallest circle is the 'identification group' which is already sympathetic to an issue proponent's aims. If an issue expands, it gains the attention of 'attentive groups' (who are interested and easily mobilised only on certain issues), the 'attentive public' (high income, high educated people with general political interests) and finally the 'general public' which is 'less active, less interested and less informed' and therefore only becomes aware of an issue if it has a striking symbolic value (1972: 107-8). This symbolism is often far removed from the original dispute because only very broad goals allow different publics to become involved, while any technical or specific discussions would dissuade general public involvement. In many cases, a rise in attention is linked to 'triggering devices' or 'unforeseen events' such as natural disasters, riots and protests, while novel issues or issues amenable to piggybacking onto existing debates are the most likely to attract wider attention (1972: 84; 112-18). General public attention almost guarantees that an issue

will be prominent on the government agenda (1972: 157). Therefore, while the idea of a politically active and knowledgeable public may be a ‘myth’, the ‘agenda building perspective serves to broaden the range of recognized influences on the public policy-making process’ (1972: 2; 164). Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 36-37) argue that gaining public attention is one of two strategies open to issue proponents. The second is venue shopping, or seeking more sympathetic audiences in institutions such as congressional committees, state governments and the courts. Therefore, while ‘issue expansion’ (the engagement of a wider audience) requires the reframing of policy problems in terms likely to attract new attention, this *need not be* in the broadest, least technical terms required by the general public.

Problem Definition

Problem definition is central to an understanding of agenda setting in both cases. It refers to ‘what we choose to identify as public issues and how we think and talk about these concerns’ (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: vii). The key point is that problems do not necessarily receive the most attention because they are the most important or immediate. There are no objective indicators to determine which ‘real world conditions’ are the most deserving of our attention. Further, the ability of decision-makers to receive and act on ‘signals’ or information about the severity of policy problems is imperfect (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005: 8). Attention is linked more strongly to the ability of issue proponents to convince enough people that ‘their’ issues are the most worthy of discussion (Dearing and Rodgers, 1996). This may not involve a battle over the *accuracy* of ‘facts’, but to direct attention to *other* facts which support a rival policy image (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 107-8; 113). Attention-grabbing strategies depend on the following factors:

Framing. Framing involves the definition of a policy’s image, or how issues are portrayed and categorised. Issues can be framed to make them appear ‘technical’ and relevant only to experts, or linked to wider social values to heighten participation (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: 5). To attract attention in the US, one may wish to link ideas to widely accepted values: ‘progress, participation, patriotism, independence from foreign domination, fairness, economic growth’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 7). However, core values may vary from country to country and over time (for example, compare the post-war and present day attitudes of most countries to the welfare state). More generally, issue expansion requires the reframing of an issue from a focus on self interest to a problem which the general public (or powerful sections within it) can relate to (Hogwood, 1987: 30). Framing is ‘a mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals’ (True et al, 2007: 161).

Most policy issues are multi-faceted and can therefore command a wide range of images. For example, smoking may be framed in terms of health, health and safety, health inequalities, nuisance, employment, the economy, customs and excise, the role of multi-national corporations, civil liberties and even human rights. Yet, while there are many ways to frame the same problem, there is limited time and energy to devote to issues. So, highly complex issues are simplified, with very few aspects focussed on at any one time at the expense of all the rest. This has policy consequences. For example, a focus on

smoking as a health issue prompts governments to restrict tobacco use, while an economic image prompts governments to support the industry (Cairney, Studlar and Mamudu, 2012). Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 109) suggest that while certain groups may exploit these limitations to create and protect a policy monopoly (based on one image for long periods), the agenda-setting process is too dynamic to expect this to go on forever. In particular, the news agenda is based on attempts to seek new angles to maintain the interest of a public audience. This new focus is accompanied by new journalists with different views, providing audiences for people who were previously ignored and creating interest within venues which were previously uninvolved. Indeed, the basis for creating monopolies - limited time, attention, cognitive abilities - also produces radical shifts of attention to different policy images.

Causality, responsibility and the availability of a solution. For Kingdon (1984: 115), policy issues only become problems when there is a solution and ‘we come to believe that we should do something about them’. This belief may follow new theories on the determinants of problems, who is to blame and who is responsible for solving the problem. For example, poverty became a public policy issue in the 1960s not because of a worsening of ‘real conditions’, but because of a shift in the issue’s image ‘from that of a private misfortune to a public problem amenable to government solutions’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 28; Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: 15). Stone (1989: 282-3; 2002: 191) suggests that assigning responsibility is a strategy of organisations seeking to prompt or justify policy intervention. They use ‘causal stories’ which highlight the cause of the problem and who is to blame. For example, several studies shifted long-held beliefs about blame in health and safety (from the worker to the employer), environmental damage (from natural phenomenon to human pollution), and road safety (from careless drivers to car manufacturers). In each case, this shift of attention prompted equivalent shifts in public policy (this should not be confused with the ‘blame game’ following disasters such as Hurricane Katrina - Boin et al, 2010).

However, in most cases there are likely to be competing sources of blame. Rochefort and Cobb’s (1994: 1-4) discussion of the LA riots in 1992 highlights multiple causes: a justified reaction to police racism; poor immigration controls; a breakdown in law and order; the failure of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society measures in inner-cities; the Republican neglect of race relations; and, a ‘poverty of values’. The same can be said for **valence** issues. While most agree that child, drug and alcohol abuses are problems, there is much less agreement on assigning responsibility and producing solutions (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 150).

Valence Issue – an issue in which there is only one legitimate position and public opinion is uniform.

Crisis and triggering events. In many cases, crises such as environmental disasters act as a ‘triggering event’, focusing public, media and government attention to an issue previously lower down on the agenda. Or, they act as ‘dramatic symbols of problems that are already rising to national attention’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 130). For example, Western attention to environmental policy peaked in 1989 following the Exxon tanker oil spill in Alaska (Dearing and Rogers, 1996: 37-39) and following the BP oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. This propensity to give disproportionate attention to

disasters (rather than more ‘mundane’ events which cause more deaths) also means that issue proponents can highlight the *potential* for dramatic crises, such as a nuclear power plant disaster (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 118-21) or an outbreak of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) or ‘mad cow disease’. In other cases, the appearance of crisis depends more on a common belief that something has gone wrong. For example, in 2008 the financial crisis associated with the ‘credit crunch’ and sub-prime mortgages topped the agenda of many countries (BBC News, 2008). Or, problems are *labelled* as a crisis ‘to elevate a concern when facing an environment overloaded with competing claims’ (Rocheft and Cobb, 1994: 21).

Measurement. Although the measurement of a problem may seem like a straightforward and technical matter, it is subject to as much interpretation and debate as issue framing. In some cases, it follows the complexity or ambiguity of the policy problem. For example, the measurement of poverty can relate to: a household or individual; mean or median incomes; absolute or relative poverty; income; wealth; and, inequalities in public service access. It may also have a different meaning in domestic and international settings: while the UK government defines the ‘poverty line’ as 60% of the overall national median income (\$450 per week in 2007) for two people with no children, the World Bank uses the figure of \$2 per person per day to define absolute poverty and \$1 to define extreme absolute poverty (Seager, 2008; Maxwell, 1999; World Bank, 2008; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005: 31).

Measurement debates have policy consequences. For example, the treatment of civil rights issues in the US changed significantly when the measure of racism shifted, from the need to prove a person’s intent to discriminate, to statistical evidence proving that an overall selection process could not have happened by chance (Stone, 1989: 291). Governments can also change the scope of their measurements (and therefore policy responses) over time. For example, in the UK, unemployment means the number of people out of work and claiming unemployment benefit. However, from the 1980s the government introduced various policies to restrict the number of people who qualified for this benefit. It included excluding students and government trainees, restricting unemployment benefit to those who had made significant National Insurance tax contributions and making individuals prove that they were actively seeking work. The UK also has, when compared to the rest of the EU, a relatively high number of economically inactive people who claim sickness rather than unemployment benefits (Webster, 2002; Machin, 2004).

Box 9.3 Up and Down With Ecology: The ‘Issue-Attention Cycle’

Do peaks in attention cause policy change? Downs’ (1972) thesis is that public attention is fleeting, even when this involves ‘a continuing problem of crucial importance to society’. A rise in interest does not mean a worsening of the problem, while falling interest does not suggest that the problem has been solved. This point is a key tenet of the literature: ‘Virtually every study of agenda-setting has found ... that issues emerge and recede from the public agenda without important changes in the nature of the issues themselves’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 47). The issue attention cycle has five stages:

- (1) Pre-problem – a problem alarms experts but doesn't yet capture public attention.
- (2) Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm – concentrated public attention is accompanied by a widespread hope that the problem can be solved quickly.
- (3) Realizing the cost of significant progress – when the public realises that the solution involves major costs or a significant change in behaviour.
- (4) Gradual decline of intense public interest – people feel discouraged at the prospect of change and shift their attention to the next issue at stage two.
- (5) Post-problem– public attention is minimal or spasmodic and the problem has been replaced by another issue.

Downs posits a weak link between public attention and policy change, since the public is rarely engaged long enough to see matters through. However, in many cases there *is* a policy response which creates new institutions that operate long after public interest has waned (Downs, 1972). This point is made more strongly by Peters and Hogwood (1985: 251; see also Hogwood, 1992) who find a positive relationship between public attention and government reorganisations. As Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 87) argue, peak periods of organisation change 'generally coincided with Gallup Poll data showing public concern with the same problems'. Therefore, 'the public is seriously involved in the agenda-setting process, not an ignored bystander' (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005: 269).

The policy responses from public attention may have long-term effects. A realization of the costs of policy change may occur only after legislation has passed and policy is being implemented (Peters and Hogwood, 1985: 239). New government organisations are created but "do not simply 'fade away' like public interest or media attention" (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 84-7; 191). For example, the 'euphoric enthusiasm' for nuclear power as a policy solution from the 1940s led decision-makers to support the industry and defer to their expertise. Since it took 20 years to 'realize the cost' of nuclear progress, by the time public opinion shifted against nuclear power the policy was too far advanced to reverse easily. It also took 10 years for mobilizations based on a negative image of pesticides to break down the institutional arrangements set up following post-war enthusiasm (Baumgartner and Jones 1993: 88, 97, 101, 169; Baumgartner and Mahoney 2005 also discuss Medicare, Medicaid, the Environmental Protection Agency and civil rights policies).

Problem Definition and Venue Shopping

Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) discussion of venue shopping is inspired by Schattschneider's (1960) suggestion (chapter 3) that power involves the competition to 'socialize' or 'privatize' conflict. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) highlight the role of government as a source for the socialization and privatization of conflict. For example, if iron triangles or policy communities (the 'winners') organise issues out of politics by creating a policy monopoly, their opponents (the 'losers') 'will have the incentive to look for allies elsewhere' (1993: 35-7).

Policy monopolies and communities are common, but so too is the ability to challenge monopolies and make authoritative decisions in other venues. Monopolies are created

when institutional arrangements reinforce the relationships between certain interest groups and public officials in a single venue. The creation of a policy monopoly limits policy debate and the scope for policy change. The main options for issue proponents are two-fold. First, they can challenge the dominance of a monopoly within this venue. The attitudes of decision-makers are susceptible to change according to the political circumstances they operate within. As Jones (1994: 5) argues, 'decision-makers value or weight preferences differently depending on the context in which they are evoked'. Decision-makers have many (often contradictory) objectives, most issues are multi-faceted and there are many ways to solve policy problems. Therefore, it may be possible to shift the opinions of decision makers by 'shifting the focus of their attention from one set of implications to another' (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 30).

Second, if unsuccessful, they can venue-shop and seek more sympathetic audiences elsewhere (the process is often trial-and-error rather than 'rational' - Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 276). The consequence of a multiplicity of venues (across government and at different stages of the policy process) is that an issue may be viewed or framed differently in different arenas at different times (since each venue may be more receptive to a different policy image). The ability to venue shop has increased since the post-war period. An increasingly complex political system - containing a much larger number of groups, experts and other policy participants - makes it much more difficult for policy issues to be insulated from the wider political process and for policy monopolies to restrict debate (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 43). In most cases there is no natural jurisdiction for policy problems and no 'iron clad logic' for an issue to be considered at, say, the national rather than local level. It is also common for the decision-making responsibility for policy problems to shift over time (1993: 32-3).

This premise allows us to explain why policy change follows a mutually-reinforcing process of increased attention, venue shift and shifting policy images. The key strategy is to involve the previously uninvolved. If issues 'break out' of these policy communities and are considered in one or more alternative venues, then the scope for new ways to examine and solve policy problems increases. As people come to understand the nature of a policy problem in a different way (and this new understanding of the problem is more closely linked to their priorities), more people become interested and involved (1993: 8). The more 'outside' involvement there is, then the greater likelihood of a further shift of the policy image, as new ideas are discussed and new policy solutions are proposed by new participants.

Case Studies of Punctuated Equilibrium: 'Some Issues Catch Fire'

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) compare a range of case studies over several decades to demonstrate the creation of, and challenge to, policy monopolies. Environmental policy demonstrates the use of venue shopping to change a policy's image, with the new involvement of one venue producing a snowball effect. Environmental groups, who were unhappy at losing out on regulatory decisions made by a branch of the federal government, appealed to previously uninvolved members of Congress. Congress became more sympathetic to a new image of environmental policy and passed legislation (the National Environmental Protection Act, NEPA, 1969) to regulate business, allow groups

greater access to the courts, and pave the way for a federal response (the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency) more in line with the new policy image (1993: 38).

In nuclear power, Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 59-82), describe the effect of a 'Downsian mobilization', or a period of public enthusiasm which prompts governments to solve policy problems (and then leave the details to experts). The government-inspired enthusiasm for nuclear produced a positive policy image - stressing the peaceful use of nuclear materials, reduced bills, independence from imported oil, employment, reduced air pollution and the economic benefits of new technology - which supported the formation of a post-war policy monopoly. As the process moved from policy making to implementation, public, media and government attention fell and the details of policy were left to the (mainly private sector) experts, federal agencies (e.g. Atomic Energy Commission, AEC) and certain congressional committees.

However, from the late 1960s, there was increased opposition from environmentalists, local activists and nuclear scientists expressing concerns about safety. It suggests a 'Schattschneider mobilization', or an expansion of the scope of conflict (by actors previously excluded from iron triangles) to challenge a monopoly and change the direction of policy. This is most effective when internal scientific divisions and negative media attention are already apparent. The safety agenda was pursued through public hearings on nuclear licensing and, by the 1970s, public and media attention rose to reflect these new concerns (with the number of negative articles beginning to outnumber the positive). A range of venues became involved in the issue. The focus of Congress (and an increasing number of committees) became increasingly negative and NEPA reinforced the need for more stringent nuclear regulation. It was followed by a series of key decisions in the courts, including the retrospective application of NEPA to previous AEC licensing decisions, and supplementary action by state and local governments (including the use of planning laws to delay the building of nuclear plants). The new policy image was cemented in the public's mind by the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant. The private sector lost confidence in the industry and no nuclear plants have been commissioned since 1977. Overall, the combination of interest group opposition and venue shopping shifted the policy image of nuclear power from highly positive to overwhelmingly negative. The policy monopoly was maintained for over 20 years then destroyed. A post-war policy of power plant expansion was replaced by increased regulation (but note that the new context of climate change may shift its image once more – Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 260-4).

In the early 20th century, a tobacco policy monopoly was based on a positive policy image (economic benefits) and deferral to the experts in agriculture (with congressional oversight largely restricted to this arena). Tobacco consumption was high and media coverage was very low and generally positive, particularly during World War 2 when smoking had a glamorous image. However, from the 1950s there was significant issue expansion, with anti-tobacco groups increasingly setting the media agenda with a negative policy image. Tobacco consumption fell dramatically from the 1950s and in 1964 the surgeon general's report cemented a new image based on ill-health. Congressional attention followed in the mid-1970s, with health committee hearings

outnumbering agriculture and a range of public health groups increasingly involved and able to reframe the debate in negative terms (1993: 114; 210). By the 1980s, this new image was pursued through a series of high profile court cases and by innovative states such as New York and California providing best practice and the scope for policy diffusion (Studlar, 2002). By the 2000s tobacco control became ‘comprehensive’ (Cairney et al, 2012) and the old pro-tobacco subsystem was completely ‘destroyed’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 280).

Also in the early 20th century, a pesticides policy monopoly was based on a positive policy image (eradicating harmful insects, boosting agricultural exports, ending world hunger by boosting food production), public and media ‘enthusiasm for progress through chemistry’ and deferral to the experts in agriculture and the chemical industry (who enjoyed a close relationship with the Department of Agriculture, USDA, and the congressional agriculture committee - 1993: 95). Environmental concerns were marginalised, consumer interests were generally ignored and the Food and Drug Administration (within the USDA) had no jurisdiction over pesticide control. However, the ‘golden age’ of pesticides was punctured in 1957 following the devastating failure of two large insect eradication campaigns and in 1959 following the FDA’s decision to ban the sale of a crop tainted with pesticide residue. It shifted media and Congressional attention from the economic benefits of pesticides to their ineffectiveness, adverse health effects, and environmental damage. By the late 1960s, environmental groups had found support within multiple venues (Congress, the courts, executive and state agencies) and the enforced regulation of pesticide use rocketed.

The Generalisability of Punctuated Equilibrium: (1) From Case Studies to Theory

Positive feedback – a mechanism to amplify forces for change. E.g. one change causes a ‘bandwagon effect’.

Negative feedback – a mechanism to ‘rein back’ forces for change. One change is resisted and goes no further.

Jones and Baumgartner (2005: 278) address the possibility that punctuated equilibrium is merely a feature of policy monopolies and the case studies that they selected (see also Baumgartner and Jones, 2002 and True et al, 2007: 163 for a list of case studies by other authors). Their focus shifted to more general theories about agenda-setting and policy change. For example, ‘disproportionate information processing’ suggests that most government responses are not in proportion with the ‘signals’ that they receive from the outside world. Instead, political systems produce **negative** and **positive feedback**. While the former acts as a counterbalance to political forces, the latter reinforces those forces to produce radical change (Baumgartner and Jones, 2002: 8-16). This

relates directly to the case study results: when policy monopolies are maintained, decision-makers appear unreceptive to new information but, in periods of punctuation, decision-makers appear to become hyper-sensitive to new information (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005: 8; 18). It also contributes to a much wider ‘General Punctuation Hypothesis’ (or the identification of ‘disruptive dynamics’ – Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 253): although governing institutions receive ‘feedback’ on their policies (for example, from interest groups, the media or public opinion), they do not respond proportionately. The ‘selective attention’ of decision-makers or institutions explains why

issues can be relatively high on certain agendas, but not acted upon; why these powerful signals are often ignored and policies remain stable for long periods. Policymakers are *unwilling* to focus on certain issues, either because ideology precludes action in some areas, there is an established view within government about how to address the issue, or because the process of acting ‘rationally’ (and making explicit trade-offs between a wide range of decisions) is often unpopular (the former suggests that a change in party of government may produce policy change, but a key point from punctuated equilibrium theory is that party changes are not the only source of ‘policy disruptions’ - Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 287). They are also *unable* to give issues significant attention, because the focus on one issue means ignoring 99 others. Change therefore requires a critical mass of attention to overcome the conservatism of decision-makers and shift their attention from competing problems (2005: 19-20; 48-51). If the levels of external pressure reach this tipping point, they cause major and infrequent punctuations rather than smaller and more regular policy changes: the burst in attention and communication becomes self-reinforcing; new approaches are considered; different ‘weights’ are applied to the same categories of information; policy is driven ideologically by new actors; and/or the ‘new’ issue sparks off new conflicts between political actors (2005: 52; 69). Information processing is characterised by ‘stasis interrupted by bursts of innovation’ and policy responses are unpredictable and episodic rather than continuous (2005: 20).

To demonstrate the applicability of this theory to policy change, the Policy Agendas Project (<http://www.policyagendas.org/>) extends the analysis from particular case studies to the dynamics of government budgets, elections and policymaker attention. Most notably, Jones and Baumgartner (2005: 111; True et al, 2007) produce a comprehensive analysis of post-war US public expenditure. Public expenditure changes have generally become key indicators in public policy because: (a) they allow us to measure policy changes in a systematic way; and (b) spending commitments are more concrete than more vague policy intentions (chapter 2). The results are displayed in figure 9.1 which highlights the annual percentage change of US budgets in each policy area (such as health, social security, and education). But what does the figure tell us and how should the results be interpreted? Jones and Baumgartner (2005) argue that if the overall nature of budgeting changes was incremental (and not punctuated), then the figure should display a **normal distribution**. This is a statistical term which usually refers to two things: (a) the **mean** figure; and (b) the **standard deviation** from the mean. A normal distribution suggests that most (68%) of all the values are slightly different from the mean, while almost all (95%) are no more than moderately different. In other words, while there will be a small handful of instances in which the values differ markedly from the mean, most values are bunched closely together, while some are further away from the mean, but not remarkably so (box 9.4).

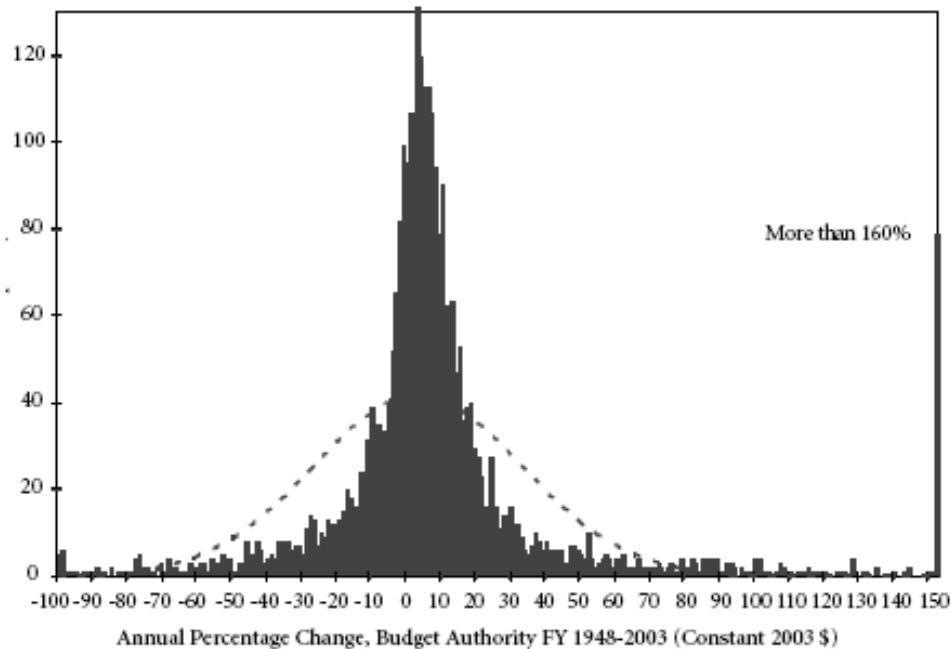


Figure 9.1 – A Picture of the General Punctuation Hypothesis in Action. Source: True et al (2007: 170). It shows the Annual Percentage Change in U.S. Budget Authority for Office of Management and Budget Programmatic Subfunctions, Financial Year 1947 through FY 2003. Note that this tracks the amount dedicated (not the amount spent) and variation from the **mode** (a 4% real annual rise is the most common) rather than the mean (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005: 110-1).

We may expect no more than a normal distribution because incrementalism suggests a common type of change in most policy areas: a small change from previous years in most cases, combined with moderate change overall (2005: 120-3). Since there is some doubt about the size of an increment (chapter 5), the normal curve accounts for a degree of variety of annual budget changes (up to $\pm 80\%$ in some cases in any one year). Yet, figure 9.1 demonstrates that the distribution of value is **leptokurtic**. This has two main features. First, a higher central peak (and lower level of dispersion) than we would expect. In the vast majority of cases the **real increase** or decrease in annual spending is very low and the size of the increment is very small. Jones and Baumgartner (2005: 112) call this ‘hyperincrementalism’. Second, there are many more **outliers** than we would expect under a normal distribution. In a data set with approximately 3300 values we may expect approximately 15-20 outliers. Yet, there are many more. For example, the number of cases of annual change greater than $+160\%$ is 75 (2005: 110). The analysis suggests that in a small but very important number of cases, ‘programs received huge boosts, propelling them to double or triple their original sizes or more’ (2005: 112). Overall, budget change is characterised by a *huge number of small changes* in each policy category, combined with a *small number of huge changes* (True et al, 2007: 166).

This outcome results from ‘disproportionate information processing’. Although there is no shortage of information, most issues are ignored or receive little attention, while some receive an intense level of attention which produces major policy consequences (2005: 112). These results represent the most important confirmation of the general punctuation

hypothesis, and ‘400,000 observations collected as part of the Policy Agendas Project’ demonstrate that the hypothesis ‘is a fundamental characteristic of the American political system (2005: 278). Indeed, the absence of a normal distribution is also a feature demonstrated by data on events such as US elections and congressional legislation and hearings (although the effect is most marked in budget data) (Baumgartner et al, 2009: 611).

Box 9.4 Key terms for Statistical Analysis

Mean – the average, calculated by adding all values together and dividing by the number of values. **Mode** – the average, calculated by identifying the most frequent value.

Standard deviation – a measure of statistical dispersion which generally denotes deviation from the mean (figure 9.1 uses the mode). If all values are the same, then the SD is zero (e.g. the numbers 100, 100 and 100). The greater the dispersion (e.g. 0, 100, 200), then the greater the SD.

Normal distribution – denotes the level of SD from the mean. It suggests that 68% of all values fall within a range of plus or minus one standard deviation from the mean, while 95% fall within a range of plus or minus two standard deviations.

Leptokurtic - a distribution which is not normal because it has a higher central peak and more outliers. More than 68% fall within ± 1 standard deviation but less than 95% fall within a range of ± 2 .

Outlier - a value which is further away from the mean than the normal distribution suggests.

Real increase – an increase in spending which takes inflation into account.

The Generalisability of Punctuated Equilibrium: (2) Other Political Systems

There is good reason to think that punctuated equilibrium theory applies mostly to the US. It was originally used to explain why the US political system ‘conservatively designed to resist many efforts at change’ also helped produce ‘bursts of change’ (True et al, 2007: 157). Punctuated equilibrium suggests that the key features which explain stability - the separation of powers (executive, legislative and judicial), overlapping jurisdictions (between institutions or between federal, state and local government) and the pluralistic interaction between groups (in which the ‘mobilization of one group will lead to the countermobilization of another’ – Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 4-5) – also help explain major punctuations. In most cases, these checks and balances combine with the ability of organised interests to ‘counter-mobilise’ to block radical policy change. However, in a small number of cases, mobilizations are accompanied by renewed interest among one or more venues. In such cases, ‘the newcomers are proponents of changes ... and they often overwhelm the previously controlling powers’ (2007: 157). Therefore, the diffusion of power across US government increases the scope for venue shift and helps groups form new alliances with decision-makers capable of challenging monopolies.

Yet, the causal factors identified by punctuated equilibrium apply to a wide range of political systems. First, the separation of powers and/ or existence of overlapping jurisdictions is not limited to the US. Indeed, the entanglement of policy issues (when decision-making power is vested in more than level of government) is common to devolved and federal systems (Keating 2005: 18; Cairney, 2006). Second, the multi-level

governance literature demonstrates the increasing significance of multiple decision-making venues (and issue network rather than policy community relationships – Richardson, 2006: 25) in the EU and, more notably, countries such as the UK associated with a concentration of power via parliamentary government (chapter 8). Third, the component parts of punctuated equilibrium – bounded rationality, information processing, complexity, agenda setting and group-government relations - are central to the policy literature as a whole. Processes such as ‘disproportionate information processing’ are universal; what we are really talking about is the effect of bounded rationality in complex policymaking environments.

Punctuated equilibrium has been applied extensively to policy change in Canada, the EU and many European countries (True et al, 2007: 175; John, 2006; Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 255; Baumgartner et al, 2006) and continues to grow in importance as a truly comparative policy theory. For example, Jones et al (2009: 855) identify the same basic distribution of budget changes in the US, UK, Canada, France, Germany, Belgium and Denmark: ‘budgets are highly incremental, yet occasionally are punctuated by large changes’. Further, Baumgartner et al (2009) show that variations in the data may relate as much to the stage of the policy cycle as the political system. Much depends on the levels of ‘friction’, or costs related to coordination, which are lower at the beginning of the policy cycle than the end. So, for example, it is easier for legislative committees to come together to focus on new issues than for large governments to shift their budgets to reflect new priorities. Consequently, the former will display lower levels of kurtosis (change is effectively more ‘normal’) than the latter (which displays relatively high levels of both minimal and dramatic changes) (2009: 609).

Conclusion

The aim of punctuated equilibrium is to explain long periods of policy stability punctuated by short but intense periods of change. A combination of bounded rationality and agenda setting explains how policy monopolies can be created and destroyed. While there is an infinite number of ways to understand policy problems, there is only so much time and energy to devote to issues. So, highly complex issues are simplified, with very few aspects focussed on at any one time at the expense of all the rest. Problem definition is crucial because the allocation of resources follows the image of the policy problem. Policy stability depends on the ability of policy communities to maintain a policy monopoly. The production of a policy monopoly follows the successful definition of a policy problem in a certain way, to limit the number of participants who can claim a legitimate role in the process. As the examples of pesticides and nuclear power suggest, this often follows a burst of wider public and governmental enthusiasm for policy change. Such ‘Downsian mobilizations’ produce a supportive policy image, based on the idea that economic progress and technological advance has solved the policy problem, allowing policy communities to operate for long periods with very little external attention. After the main policy decision is made, the details are left to policy experts and specialists in government. This allows the participants to frame the process as ‘technical’ to reduce public interest or ‘specialist’ to exclude those groups considered to have no expertise. The lack of attention or external involvement allows communities to build up a policy-

delivering infrastructure that is difficult to dismantle, even during periods of negative attention.

Policy change is explained by a successful challenge to policy monopolies. Those excluded from monopolies have an interest in challenging or reshaping the dominant way of defining policy problems. This may come from within, by ensuring that new ideas or evidence force a shift in government attention to a new policy image. Or, if this new image is stifled, then groups attempt to expand the scope of conflict and promote it to a more sympathetic audience. ‘Schattschneider mobilizations’ can extend other decision-making venues and/ or to the wider public. In either case, the successful redefinition of a policy problem prompts an influx of new actors. As the examples of pesticides and nuclear power suggest, the new policy image based on safety concerns produced a snowball effect. It began with rising dissent among experts within a policy community, followed by increased media coverage critical of the status quo. Previously excluded interest groups exploited this shift of focus to attract the attention of decision-makers in other venues. The adoption of the safety agenda in one venue had a knock-on effect, providing more legitimacy for the new image and creating an incentive for decision-makers in other venues to become involved. The result was profound policy change following a burst of new regulations by Congress, the courts and multiple levels of government. Policy change therefore follows a mutually-reinforcing process of increased attention, venue shift and shifting policy images. As people come to understand the nature of a policy problem in a different way, then more people become interested and involved. The more ‘outside’ involvement there is, then the greater likelihood of a further shift to the policy image, as new ideas are discussed and new policy solutions are proposed by new participants.

The ‘general punctuation hypothesis’ suggests that this effect is not limited to policy communities. Rather, the case studies highlight a wider process of ‘disproportionate information processing’. Most government responses are not in proportion with the ‘signals’ that they receive from the outside world. They are either insensitive or hypersensitive to policy relevant information. As a result, most policies stay the same for long periods because decision makers are unwilling or unable to pay them sufficient attention. However, in a small number of cases, policy changes radically as decision-makers respond to a critical mass of external attention. The burst of governmental attention is accompanied by a sense of policy malaise and a need to play ‘catch up’. New ideas are considered, different ‘weights’ are applied to the same kinds of information; and the ‘new’ issue sparks off new conflicts between political actors. These bursts of attention produce short bursts of radical policy change. The best demonstration of this picture of stability and change can be found in budgeting. Budget change is characterised by a widespread ‘hyperincrementalism’ (or a huge number of small annual budget changes), combined with a small number of huge changes to annual budgets. Overall, the picture is more dynamic than incrementalism suggests, even if most policy making appears to be incremental! Although most policy issues display stability and there are many policy communities, these are constantly being created and destroyed. Therefore, any snapshot of the political system will be misleading since it shows an overall picture of stability, but not the process of profound change over a longer period.

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